

THE PATCHWORK METROPOLIS 1989-2014

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Abstract

The contemporary discussion about the urbanization in the Netherlands is characterized by the fear of the phenomenon of dispersion. Huge efforts are spent to maintain the cities compact and manageable by setting always new boundaries between what were the ancient cities that compose the Randstad and the contemporary territory once called Green Hearth. What in reality has been achieved, through this theoretical blindness, is just a continuous juxtaposition of new patches. Job and population density data clearly show that the Netherlands cannot be represented anymore as a series of medium size cities located in an open landscape. Perhaps there was a period when red and green on topographical maps could be interpreted as each other opposite, but today the Randstad cannot be simplified with this opposition, too many exceptions, in fact, are appearing in the territory in between and too many important elements would be cut out. If this is true, which model or structure can be used to represent what is happening in the contemporary Dutch territory?

Due to the process of intensification of the use of the territory, particularly evident in a quite small and very populated country as the Netherlands, the different functions has been developed separately, trying to capitalize the used land. In the light of this phenomenon the Randstad is evolving towards an extensive carpet of patches, every one with his own program and specific spatial structure, as conceived in 1989 by Willem Jan Neutelings. "In this heterogeneous field the contradiction between city and landscape is abolished" (Neutelings, 1989). A complete territory has been shaped by the interactions between social and economical processes. New housing developments, parks, glasshouses agglomerations, old cities are laying side by side in a new territorial structure populated by a series of "wide relatively homogeneous areas that differ from their surroundings" (Forman, 1995).

The methodology used for this study consists in the comparison of the territorial condition of the Randstad during the late eighties, when Willem Jan Neutelings proposed his personal reinterpretation of the area in between The Hague and Rotterdam, called "Tapijtmetroop", with the evolution of the Dutch territory over the last 25 years, trying to actualize and understand the consequence of the Neutelings prevision.

Keywords: Patchwork, metropolis, urban model, Randstad, W. J. Neutelings,

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1989 the young Dutch architect Jan Neutelings, who had just left the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, was called to develop a project for the area in between Rotterdam and The Hague that was going to face in the next years a huge increment of population and activities. This part of the Dutch territory is located in between two urban areas but, on the same time, it is located in the middle of another construction known as the Randstad. In this context he proposed his personal reinterpretation called *tapijtmetropool* or “carpet metropolis”. This project was published in 1991 in a monograph that the O10 dedicated each year to the winner of the Maaskant prize for the young Dutch architect of the year.

The aim of this paper is to firstly analyse from an historical and theoretical point of view the project for the Patchwork metropolis developed by Neutelings and then to understand how this model was able to foresee or influence the contemporary development of the Randstad territory.

2. THE PATCHWORK METROPOLIS, W. J. NEUTELINGS 1989

2.1 The conception of the model

It is important to briefly recall that the period in which Neutelings developed his patchwork metropolis the Dutch planning culture and large part of the European urban discipline were strongly focusing on the problem of the periphery and the fright of the phenomenon of the fragmentation and urban dispersion. These phenomenon were intended as a spectre that haunts the future of urban societies, leading to social reclusion or to the disruption of what is perceived as the basis of the social and political urban life (Donzelot, 1999; Van Kempen, 1994; Harvey, 1996). In particular the 1980s recession and the political change with the neo-liberal governments in Europe and United States contributed largely to this crisis. Decentralization and market power attracted more stakeholders in the planning arena with very different and conflicting interests and agendas (Jihad and Jacques, 2012).

Within this context the Neutelings project appeared as a fresh answer to the Dutch urban problems. Using just two sketched maps Jan Neutelings was able to propose a complete new interpretation of the Randstad.



Figure 1. Willem Jan Neutelings, (1989) De Tapijtmetroop

The first image (figure 1 on the left) represent the territory in between the Hague and Rotterdam as a series of black urban figures on top of a white background, highlighting the conceptual simplification behind the common way to interpret the urban condition.

The second sketch (figure 1 on the right) reconsiders the same area through a critical reinterpretation. This part of the Randstad is shown as a continuous carpet reaching from the North sea to the Nieuwe Maas river. Each pattern represents a place with a specific programme and a specific physical structure. The conception at the base of this model is that within this heterogeneous field the contradiction between the city and landscape is abolished. There is only a series of cultivated patterns. Thought a closer look to the patchwork sketch it is possible to notice that not only the periphery is a composition of patches but also the inner city centres are transformed into a series of patterns. The maps present a drastic new interpretation of the area, in which the juxtaposition of shifting fragments seems the structure's single element of consistency.

As recalled by Fritz Palboom¹, Neutelings pictures the metropolitan way of life as that which is evolving within the Dutch urbanized landscape. Today's urbanite uses and experiences his environment in fragments, which are strong together along the highway. Appearing within the frame formed by the car window, "during a twenty minute drive" one sees "sculptural oil refineries, colourful fields of flowers, intimate garden cities, medieval rings of canals, eight-lane highways...airports, marketplaces, plazas, and mosques." (Neutelings, 1989)

2.2 The theoretical metaphor of the patchwork

The patchwork has so to be understood firstly as a theoretical metaphor in order to catch the characteristic that can be then applied in a real territory. The Appalachian woman that produce the patchworks start their work without a real preset plan, but just with a set of guidelines that have to be declined according to the raw material that they have. The work is guided by their own taste in juxtaposing patches of different sizes and colours. In the urban field we can compare this process with the attribute of compatibility. The arrangement of the patches is leaded by considerations about compatibility and incompatibility of visual, functional and scalar characters of the patches.

The patchwork is opposed to the idea of fragmentation which is a negative figure, developed between the 19th and 20th century, that means that something got broken in the continuity of the city of the 18th and 19th century. The patchwork instead is composed by patches, a series of entities everyone with its own identity, arranged together in a superior unity.

The patchwork is a paratactic figure. The way in which the patches are adjusted together does not follow any comprehensive plan. The patchwork does not contemplate any syntax, just a vocabulary of patches managed following some rules of compatibility and incompatibility.

[1] Palmboom F., Polycentrism and urbanized landscape in the Netherlands, *Zodiac* no.18, 1997

The place of collision between the patches is the real critical and interesting point of the patchwork metropolis. What is happening in between the pure crystals (Friedrich Schlegel)? (Secchi, 2011)ⁱⁱ

2.2 The influence of the patchwork in the Dutch urban culture

The fortune of this project was immediately very large, able to influence a generation of young Dutch designers, especially for the capacity of the patchwork model to give a structure to what was thought as a just fragmented condition, turning the Randstad lack of coherence into its planning solution, into a breeding ground of prospective projects.



Figure 2. From the left: Willem Jan Neutelings, (1989) De Tapijtmetroopool; Adrian Geuze (1993) De Alexanderpolder; OMA (2002) Deltametroopool

In creating his “wilderness” study, for instance, Adrian Geuze took the same point of departure, as did Neutelings. The modern urban dweller is becoming an exploratory and extremely mobile individual; he can exploit the entire landscape, live and work anywhere, collectively or individually. “People are continuously moving from one patch to another. Every patch has something different to offer and therefore attracts various sectors of population. In the weekend you can go to the marina, spend the day working in your farm and the night going to Hook Van Holland. The problem now is that the city cannot be understood any more as a spatial element, because is not a spatial composition.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Also the project entitle “Deltametroopool” developed in the 2002 by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture follows the Neutelings intuition describing the South Wing region as an un-coherent urban agglomeration, a “field metropolis” that can offer huge potential to work efficiently as a single unit. In order to achieve so OMA proposed the transformation of the A13 motorway into a city boulevard able to give a strong identity to the entire “field metropolis”.

[2] Extract of an interview of the Author with Bernardo Secchi, May 2011

[3] Extract of an interview of the Author with Willem Jan Neutelings, June 2011

Recently the vision proposed by Architecture Workroom, Floris Alkemade and LOLA, for the International Architecture Biennale of Rotterdam (IABR) 2014, reinterpret the Brabantstat as a mosaic city, as an “extensive and flexible mosaic, with different land use both in high and low densities, with smaller cities and many villages, intensive agriculture and small industry, and with an abundance of nature and water”^{iv}. Therefore the commission explicitly used the patchwork model as the legitimizing justification of the future policies that the Govern of Brabant should use to increase the economical competitiveness of the Region and its territorial diversity.

In order to provisionally conclude the first part of historical analyses of the Patchwork project it is important to notice the persistence of the model over 25 years of Dutch theoretical urban discussion and the fascination and the influence that was able to perform in the young generation of Dutch designers and researchers. Therefore further below will be highlighted the actualisation of the model in the real urban practice trying to understand if the Neutelings prevision have found a real effect in the contemporary Randstad territorial configuration.

3. THE VINEX PARADIGM AND THE NEW URBAN FORM

The Randstad is regarded as the model city of late twenty-century culture. It is the unfolded metropolis, a variegated and well-connected conglomerate of enclaves regulated by the Dutch planning machine. (Geuze, 1993)

The Dutch planning policies has always been based on the ancient but seemingly still valid theme of the “Green Heart” in which the core of the Randstad area would remain empty, encircled by a ring of cities. “The Green Heart, always adjusted, never analyzed, has become the more and more unconscious formula that guide the planning and development of the country” (Koolhaas, 1997). Due to its vanishing agricultural role this central green area has lost its economic base and with that the only active reason until now for safeguarding its empty expanse. An effective building ban act replaced today the agricultural role with ecological reasons.

After the 1990, the supplement of the 4th policy of spatial planning came in stressing even stronger the concept of compact city. The future housing development called VINEX were planned close to the main dense centre and were intended to strengthen the position and the economy of the main cities. The application of this sort of “land sparing policy” brought immediately to an increase in the land prize. Due to this and to the market requests, the new developments were realized with the typical dense and low-rise environment, that today seems as the main urban leitmotiv in the Netherlands.

Because of the focus on the neighbourhood scale and the fact that there were no other stakeholders to grasp the potential of these new developments at a bigger scale, the Vinex locations are built on empty spaces within the borders of one municipality. Therefore what started as a policy to preserve and strengthen the role of the compact city actually realized a new type of urbanization in which the inhabitants use the car, take the highway everyday to reach the working place, the shopping centre or just to find a better school for their children.

[4] Extract from the IABR website: <http://iabr.nl/en/projectatelier/2014pabrabantstad>

The same critique can be raised for the new shaped business parks, shopping cities, green belt parks that were planned in the left over spaces in between the cities and the countryside. For the 2020 are foreseen 28500 ha of new green areas. This abundance of “nature”, randomly distributed in the territory and poorly connected with the pre-existing urban green areas, will improve the patched structure introduced by the Vinex policy.

All the brand-new patches are laying together, side by side, without sharing any facilities or interests, without being connected, but instead plugged with the national or international traffic network. The city is not able any more to host all the urban functions and practices, that are, with different degrees, escaping out of its borders. This concept is easily provable just taking some processes that are nowadays affecting the relation between city and countryside:

- In production and trade, as well as in entertainment, the tendency towards rationalization and specialization leads to have bigger units. These units for example supermarkets or big box stores replace a multiplicity of smaller stores, cinemas, retail shops and are difficult to be integrated into the fine grain of the compact city. They need connections to fast infrastructure, bigger parking lots, for these reasons they find a more comfortable position in the space in between the urbanized areas and the rural territories.

- In leisure, the time on weekends and vacations become ever more rigidly organized. “We are facing a thinning of possibilities for spontaneous social interaction”(Sieverts, 2007). Today’s city residents can choose their social contacts independently from their own city neighbourhoods. For these reasons a new type of leisure time has been developed that is based on the leisure centres or thematic parks that are appearing all over the territory. Playgrounds, kindergartens, sport centres: these are the spaces that have been prepared for the contemporary leisure.

- On the opposite side also the landscape is rapidly changing; it is becoming more industrialized, more artificial, more hybrid because it has to host all the functions and the practices that don’t find anymore space in the contemporary cities. Aside many different opinions, there is one thing on which Dutch landscape architects and planners agree: the landscape is not, or not exclusively, nature.

4. THE RISE OF THE PATCHWORK TODAY

The Randstad can be defined as an example of the change in the use of the territory and the consequent need for a change in the representation methods. By highlighting the spread of urban amenities, facilities, job places, knowledge centres and recreational areas it is visible that “the urban practices are not related any more with the urban boundaries” (Viganò, 2010) and that red and green on topographical maps could not be interpreted as each other opposite. It is instead a territory completely covered by a carpet of facilities and amenities.

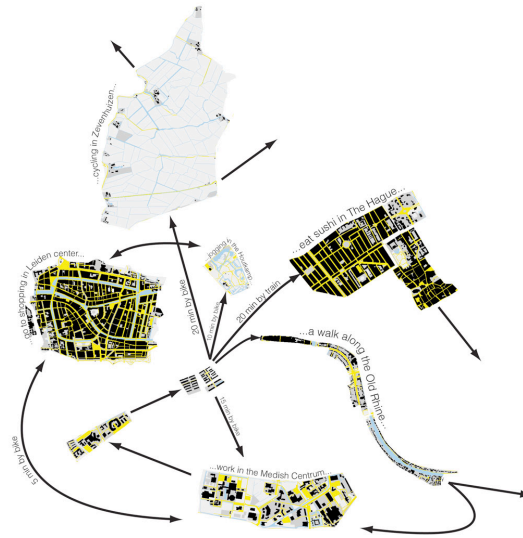


Figure 3. Author own (2011) The world according to Huda

If we try to represent how the people perceive nowadays the Dutch territory, a Debord-like image will pop out (Figure 3). In “The World according to Huda” are described the pieces of territory that a contemporary urban dweller is using, without almost mentioning their geographical position. Sometimes these areas are districts, sometimes streets along a River, sometimes just buildings. It is described an active life where the activities and the venues are becoming more important than their position. “The spheres of activities become specialized points of space which are connected with the home in a star formation by intimate traffic areas and thus dead travelling times” (Sieverts, 2000).

The entire landscape is changing. Some areas have become specialized for the purpose of a mechanized agriculture, characterized by large fields, straight asphalt roads and canalized streams. Other areas have become natural parks, their water systems have been changed and transformed in seemingly arcadia. Functions have been segregated. What before were called rural and cultural landscapes today are suffering the processes of modernization and decoration. The living environment has been transformed into spatial and temporal islands, but how to represent this paradigm change?

It is possible to represent the Dutch territory, in particular the South Wing Region, through a series of sections that graphically show the inhabitant density. The image produced by selecting just the dense areas (that exceed 1.500 inhabitants per square kilometres) shows the territory as an Archipelago of islands in a neutral see, as a figure and its background (Figure 4). With this “traditional” representation too many exceptions are appearing in the territory in between and too many important elements for the territory are cut out.

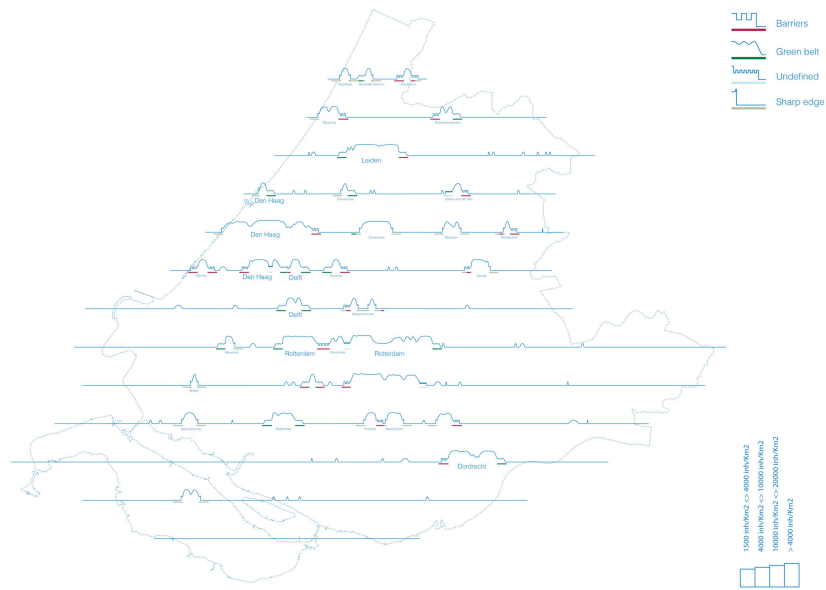


Figure 4. Author own (2011) The South Wing as an Archipelago

When the sensibility of the representation is increased, taking into consideration the entire range of inhabitant density, related with the land use, the territory shows its entire complexity, abolishing any sharp distinction between urban and rural. The image (Figure 5) highlights some phenomena that are usually hidden under the dichotomy urban and rural. It is possible to perceive, for instance, that the part of the territory in between Leiden and The Hague, even if it is almost free from any urbanization, has already a density that can be compared with some parts of the Rotterdam city centre. On the other side, inside the main cities there are some areas less dense than the Green Heart average.

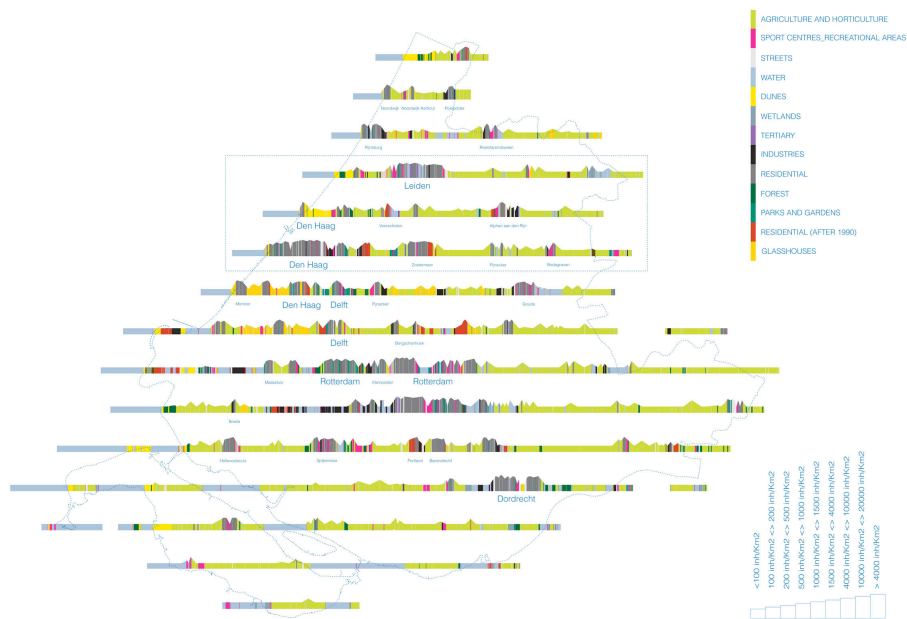


Figure 5. Author own (2011) The South Wing as a Patchwork

The cities are not any more the only interesting, dense and mixed uses areas of the Randstad. A complete territory has been shaped by the interactions between social and economical processes. This new urban condition has taken many different names according to the specificity that “the long dead of the old city produces” (Sieverts, 2007).

Some circumstances clearly differentiate the Dutch case study from other European contexts. The Netherlands is, in fact, a quite small and very populated country if compared with other European examples. Its territorial evolution has always been based on the Randstad model in which the core of the territory would remain empty, encircled by a ring of cities. This conviction has, in recent memory, never been subjected to critical scrutiny.

This sort of subtle land sparing policy has created a series of consequences that have strongly influenced the territorial evolution of the Randstad. All the functions were developed separately, trying to capitalize the used land. For instance the housing company, that were facing a market request of low rise housing, were almost obliged to develop the typical dense and low rise environments of the vinex neighbourhoods. Moreover, due to economical reasons, all the functions that are usually directly related with the housing developments were not immediately realized.

After some years the necessity to endow the new citizens with some basic facilities, forced the municipality to create, just next to the new neighbourhoods other dense patches of parks, schools and so on. The same situation can be highlighted in respect to the business parks, the new woodlands, glasshouses districts, leisure parks and golf courses.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The implicit reasons which constitute the basis of all the studies around and about past urban models can be subsumed by the capacity of the authors to foresee, influence or legitimize the contemporary analyzed territory. The relevance of the patchwork metropolis lays, indeed, in the capacity of W. J. Neutelings to have foreseen, at the end of the eighties, a tendency that from the nineties has brought the Netherlands to face a dramatic change in the territorial configuration.

The direct or indirect relation in between the Neutelings model and the following urban policies, in particular the Vinex, are still unclear and deserve a deepen analyses. However what is clear is that the Randstad is evolving towards an extensive carpet of patches, every one with his own program and specific spatial structure, as stated by Neutelings and that “in this heterogeneous field the contradiction between city and landscape is abolished” (Neutelings, 1989).

Another element that can express the influence of an urban model is related with its capacity to interpret and describe broader and different contexts. So: “Is the patchwork happening somewhere else?”

It is obvious that the Netherlands is hardly comparable with other reality, for geographical reasons, economical and social evolution. But the Vinex policy highlights how the intensification of the use of the soil, that follows the subtle land sparing policy inspired by the compact city model, has brought to maximize the use of the changed territory. The maximum number of low rise houses, the most diverse urban parks or the extremely multifunctional cultural centres are the leitmotiv that govern the evolution of the Dutch territory. In order to use the last piece of the agricultural territory, to move for the last time the line that separate the Randstad from the Green hearth. This has been translated by many designers in the necessity to ignore the existing soil condition or the connection with the neighbouring areas and the proposition of a perfectly geometrical or auto referential scheme.

Therefore it is possible to highlight that the so called sustainable urban development promoted by the European Union is based on the compact city model and in particular on the Dutch example. It is so clear that a lot of patches are appearing in the European cities. Not just urban one, also peri-urban parks, university and hospital campuses and so on. The gated communities in the docklands of London or in Hungary, the "zone d'aménagement concerté" in France, the marinas in Poland are transforming the European territory. Some of them are just isolated cases for the new European upper class, but some are becoming the conscious way in which our cities are evolving into a new urban style that have many similarities to what Neutelings in 1989 called the Patchwork Metropolis.

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11. BIOGRAPHY

Carlo Pisano Research fellow and PHD student at the University of Cagliari. He has completed with honor in 2011 the "Postgraduate Master in Urbanism", a two years track of high specialization between the TU Delft and the IUAV Venice. In 2012 his master thesis entitled "Colouring the Patchwork Metropolis" has been rewarded by the Dutch StedembouwNU as one of the best thesis in Urbanism and Landscape in the Netherlands for the years 2010-2011. From 2011 he works for the Studio Associato Bernardo Secchi e Paola Viganò in Brussels on different scales projects such as the masterplan of Nieuw Zuid in Antwerpen, the vision of Brussels 2040 and the project of the Great Moscow. In 2011 he won a research grant entitled "Adieu compact city" about the research of the contemporary urban territories with particular deepening on the territories of dispersion and the research of new urban models. He is now following several researches and, as co-professor, the fifth year thesis laboratory in urbanism and landscape entitled Lisbon Waterfront led together with the UPC of Barcelona and the Escola Superior Artística di Porto.